DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 043 871 AL 002 605

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TITLE Education of Puerto Ricans on the Mainland: Overcoming the Communication Barrier.
PUB DATE 21 Oct 70
NOTE 14p.; Paper delivered at the Conference on the Education of Puerto Rican Children on the Mainland, October 18-21, 1970, San Juan, P.R.

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.80
DESCRIPTORS *Bilingual Students, Communication Problems, *English (Second Language), Grammar, Individual Differences, *Learning Difficulties, Listening Skills, Pronunciation Instruction, *Puerto Ricans, Second Language Learning, Speech Skills, *Teacher Role

ABSTRACT

The complexity of the problems concerning the teaching of English to Puerto Ricans in the United States has rarely been fully appreciated. The author discusses some factors involved: (1) Learners may be admitted to school at any age and placed in advanced grades with their age peers; (2) Some older learners may be functionally illiterate in their own language; (3) Learners may or may not have had some previous English instruction; (4) They may enter school at any time during the semester; (5) Their schooling may be broken frequently; (6) Many live in Spanish language enclaves; (7) Language skills must be developed so that the learners may talk and write about themselves and be able to participate as quickly as possible in the total school program; (8) Learners may experience anomie if forced to function in English before they are ready; and (9) Efforts to resolve cultural conflicts may dampen the learner's desire to communicate in English. There is no one best way, the author stresses, for all students in all situations. Whatever the approach, the teaching of any feature of English should proceed sequentially. These steps, and suggestions for the teacher and administrator, are outlined briefly. (AMM)

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AL 002 605

EDUCATION OF PUERTO RICANS ON THE MAINLAND:
Overcoming the Communication Barrier

Professor Mary Finnocchiaro
October 21, 1970

Dr. Mendez, Dr. Gallardo, Dr. Ramos,
Friends, Colleagues:

I consider it a great privilege to have been asked to serve on this panel under the leadership of Dr. Adela Mendez and to speak to you on a theme whose complexity has rarely been fully appreciated--especially by the increasing number of thirty-day-expert critics of the schools.

To do justice to the topic would require several hours. I would have to cover in depth such basic issues as: Who are the learners? (How old are they? What is their level of proficiency in their native tongue?) Who are the teachers? (What training have they had? What attitudes and understandings do they bring with them?) What concepts and items must be included in the language curriculum? What methods and techniques would be most appropriate for developing in the learners the ability to communicate in English? How could we evaluate whether the school-community goals had been attained?

There are no simple answers to these questions. The problems are extraordinarily complex particularly at the elementary and secondary school levels. These problems, only too familiar to many teachers, are sometimes minimized by some research workers or are not fully understood by some who stress teacher accountability without studying all the factors involved.

People who write about teaching language on the mainland may assume, for example, that language learners enter school at about the age of six and that they progress in an unbroken continuum -- slowly or rapidly depending upon their innate capacity and the quality of instruction -- until they have mastered the language.

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The truth -- alas -- is different by far. What are some of the problems teachers face in guiding children through the communication barrier? In my visits to many schools throughout the United States, where teachers and administrators are working with children of Hispanic origin, I find them grappling with numerous problems. Let me mention a few briefly:

1. Learners may be admitted to school at <u>any</u> age and placed in advanced grades with their <u>age</u> peers. Without entering into a discussion of all the placement procedures possible I would like to say that older pupils in particular may experience difficulty in learning English because of their ingrained native language habits. Despite herculean efforts made by the school and by the learner himself we may have to resign ourselves to the fact that some of our older pupils may not master the fundamental communication skills. On the other hand, since they live in an English speaking country, we <u>must</u> provide them not only with basic knowledge and skill in the English language arts but also with the <u>incentive</u> to continue their study of English - and of course their study of Spanish - even after they leave a formal school program.

2. Some older learners may be functionally illiterate in their native language. If they are, should they first be taught to read and write in their native tongue? Certainly there are sound psychological reasons for advocating this procedure. But how far may the school reasonably go in helping them develop the communication skills through the medium of their native language? (Remember that I am talking of the older learner - someone of 13 or over.) Which language should be given priority? What proportion of time should be spent on each language and for the learning of what areas? If knowledge of the curriculum areas in English is one of the school's or community's performance objectives, when and how will the transition be made to English? Would not the decision depend on such factors as the age of the learner; his goals; the duration of the English program; the learning time

available in relation to his needs and aptitude; the availability of bilingual teachers and teacher aides; the number of linguistically handicapped ethnic groups found in the same classroom? I am not answering the questions, as you see, since there is no one answer. I believe, however, that factors such as these should be in the forefront of our thinking as we initiate projects and programs.

3. Learners may or may not have had some previous instruction in English in schools in Puerto Rico or in the United States. Even with previous schooling, since there exists no uniform corpus of materials, they may be unfamiliar with the English language curriculum of the school to which they seek admission. Each learner may be on a different point on the continuum of the listening-speaking skills, for example. One may not be able to recognize and therefore to produce the meaningful sounds, that is, the phonemes of English; another may not recognize or produce the inflections for plurality of possession; another may not recognize and produce the normal arrangements of words which are part of the system of the English language.

4. Learners may enter school at any time during the semester thus necessitating special classroom organization, intra-class grouping, individualized instruction and special materials. This too raises serious probhems. If they are placed in regular classes, how much time can the regular teacher devote to the development of their fundamental language skills? If they are in a special English class, how are they being prepared to make the transition to the regular stream of the school? What do they do for the three or four hours a day when they are not in their English class? What are the ages of the learners in the special or so-called "pull-out" class? (A wide age-span is extremely difficult to handle.) If they are attending both a special English class and a regular class, what provision is made for cooperative

teacher planning so that there is continuous reinforcement of the language learned and so that they can function on increasing levels of effectiveness in the total school program?

5. Learners may not have had an unbroken period of schooling. The children of migrant workers, for example, may attend school for a few months and then move on to another city. A characteristic of many migrations is the high incidence of pupil mobility. In some New York City schools, for example, children have been found to change schools several times in a year.

6. Despite the fact that they are living in the continental United States, many of our pupils live in language enclaves where Spanish is the dominant language. The school in cooperation with the parents and other community agencies may have to provide the necessary motivation and reinforcement of the English language communication skills.

7. On the mainland, the language skills must be developed within two interrelated contexts or streams: The learners must be enabled to talk and write about themselves, their homes, their culture, their community, their desires, wants, needs and emotions; and in addition, learners in the elementary and secondary schools must be helped to participate as quickly as possible in the total school program. The situations within which the communication skills are practiced, therefore, should encompass not only the social-cultural contexts which would permit learners to achieve personal-social adjustment but also the contexts of the several curriculum areas -- mathematics, social studies, etc. which the learners' age peers are studying.

8. The unrealistic insistence of some school personnel that English be used for most of the school day when the children are not ready to function comfortably in the second language, often results in a feeling of "anomie" - the child finding himself in a temporary no-man's land. School personnel

must be sensitized to the fact that language learners generally go through five steps which have been identified in studies by Fishman, Lambert and Herman: these are anticipation; initial conformity; discouragement; crisis (fear); integration. It is the responsibility of educators to help learners reach Stage 5 with all possible speed.

9. Most important, we cannot ignore the fact that language is the central feature of the culture of any society and that the learner's effort to resolve cultural conflicts may dampen his desire to communicate in English.

Having touched upon some of the more obvious problems of concern to many school systems, let us turn for a few moments to some of the essential features of the English language which should be taught.

Any utterance or unit of speech includes items from four interacting sub-systems that comprise the system we call language. Within the sound system, for example, pupils must learn to distinguish and produce not only the vowels and consonants arranged in definite patterns but the intonation, stress, pauses and rhythm characteristic of English. The grammar of the language, which lends itself to two major divisions - morphology and syntax - must also be taught. By morphology, we mean the forms of words which may change because of inflection for plurality, tense, etc., or because of derivation, for example, boy, boyish or able, unable, inability. By syntax, we mean the order of words required by the system.

Language includes vocabulary which is also divided into two main categories: content words and function words. Content words are the nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs -- words we can touch, see, illustrate. Function words include prepositions, auxiliaries, conjunctions and the other words of the language which may have little or no intrinsic meaning but which enable us to get the total meaning of any utterance. Formulas of the language such as Good-bye and opening conversational gambits such as So, Well, must also be

systematically taught both for recognition and production. Culture is not only reflected in language items and the gestures often accompanying them but also in the social situations in which we use language.

All of these features--and especially the situations in which they are normally used in listening and speaking and the restrictions that the language system places on their use should be taught in a well-defined, logical sequence. The item of language should be introduced in an activity or in a real situation which will give the learner the feeling that it is needed in normal communication. Some teachers prefer to start by having students listen to and learn a dialogue; some start by helping them listen to a news item; some start by telling well-known fairy or folk tales; some start by giving the new structure or vocabulary item in a situational context; some may start by dramatizing an action series and saying what they are doing as they perform the action.

The motivation and initial association of concept and sound should depend on the age of the students, their interests and the level of English they have reached, and the school-community setting. Teachers often prefer to vary the type of motivating device depending on the structure they are going to teach. With one it may be desirable to start with a dialogue; with another it may be preferable to start with the structure and then, after having practiced it, to include it in a dialogue. There is no one best way for all students in all situations. Our efforts must be directed toward finding the most effective way for each child. Whatever the approach, the teaching of any feature of English should proceed in five sequential steps: (I mention these to underscore the importance of meaning and situational reinforcement; two recently rediscovered learning principles)

1. The pupils should be led to understand the material by relating it, whenever possible, to their native language and culture. Pupils should never be asked to repeat, read or otherwise practice material whose meaning is not clear.

2. They should be led to repeat the material after it has been modelled as often as is necessary. For purposes of the learner's morale, the first repetitions should be choral followed by individual repetition, with the more able students being asked to recite first. Repetitions should be preceded by an oral model, that of the teacher or of a teacher aide or that of a voice on a tape. A live model is preferable, however.

3. Learners should be engaged in extensive oral practice of any new item, always within the situations which will strengthen its meaning.

4. After learners give repeated evidence - in varied drills - that they have understood and can produce the new item, they should be guided to select the appropriate word, sound or expression from among contrasting sounds or words.

5. They should be helped to use the new feature with other already learned items in any communication situation where they can express an idea without worrying about inflection, word order or anything else.

We noted above that students must be taught the sound grammar and vocabulary systems and the cultural concepts embedded in them in order to encode and decode language. While it would be impossible for me to begin to give all the principles and procedures needed in teaching each of these interrelated systems, I should like to point out a few which may be useful.

Pronunciation is learned primarily by imitation of the teacher or of another native speaker. If students have difficulty in imitating, it is essential that the teacher know how sounds are produced; that is, where the

speech organs are with relation to each other, so that he can diagram the points of articulation or explain how the sounds are made. Sounds or other features of speech taught in isolation should be inserted as quickly as possible in real, authentic speech utterances.

Slowing down speech or giving the full value to vowels, when we don't do so normally in speaking, does not help the learners. A few other words about pronunciation: students, particularly older students, should be exposed to a variety of voices. Native informants, other visitors, tapes or records should be used for that purpose. Even after intensive practice, older students may not attain a native English pronunciation nor should we take too much time from more essential learning activities to try to eradicate features of the sound system which do not make differences in meaning and which do not impede understanding. We should strive for comprehensibility, however, at all times.

On the other hand, I would urge strongly that patient, well-trained teachers and all others who come into contact with them try to develop in younger children -- those below the ages of eleven or twelve -- a native or near-native pronunciation. It is possible at that age level and it would do the children a grave injustice if these efforts were not made.

Such a recommendation should not be mistaken for a desire on my part or that of school personnel to give less importance to the child's Spanish language. The goal of the program should be bilingualism -- and, of course, biculturalism -- in every sense of the word.

With relation to the grammar or structure, it is imperative that all learners be made aware of the recurring features which make us consider language a "system" and without which communication would be impossible.

Through numerous examples, the pupils should be made to hear, say, and perceive the form, position and function of any new item within the utterances being presented. With younger learners, this may be accomplished without conscious awareness on their part through repetition and dramatization of the same structure numerous times in classroom situations which clarify their meaning. Older students should, in addition, be helped to verbalize the underlying rule or generalization.

And now, please allow me to speak for a few moments about the listening or speaking skills whose development we generally take for granted but which in reality require a good knowledge and use of every feature of the complex interrelated system of English. Listening implies the ability of the learner to distinguish in what he hears all the meaningful sounds, intonation patterns, words, word groups and cultural situations. It presupposes, too, his ability to retain what he heard at the beginning of a stretch of speech to its very end so that he can understand the total meaning of the speaker. Eventually, the learner should understand the normal rapid stream of speech of a native English speaker -- at his level of maturity of course -- even when there is noise interference. Speaking implies the ability of the learner to think of an idea he wishes to express--either initiating the conversation or responding to a previous speaker--and to express the idea, using the meaningful signals of English; that is its sounds, intonations, inflections, syntax and vocabulary--easily and without labored thought. It includes also his ability to use the features of language in the cultural situations in which they are most appropriate. All of these operations must be done simultaneously!

Such spontaneous, creative use of language may take years of learning depending on the age of the learner, his motivation, his aptitude and the quality of instruction. It is brought about gradually--nearly imperceptibly sometimes--by well-trained teachers using specially designed materials. It is brought about by the teacher and curriculum writer recognizing that language skill must be developed in two parallel streams. (I do not believe that a long period of language manipulation should precede communication.) In order to engender interest and to encourage communication, simple but real conversations should be engaged in from the very first day; stories and songs should be taught; questions such as "What would you say" requiring a simple Yes or No answer should be asked. At the same time, however, each item of English must be taught in a systematic, logical progression so that the appropriate features and arrangements of sound and word forms are eventually used habitually and automatically by the learner and so that his stream of speech becomes increasingly more sustained, more complex and more correct.

While I have examined language items and listening and speaking skills separately, it is essential to underscore that these are interrelated in actual practice and strengthen each other. We learn to speak, for example, of course by speaking but also by listening and by reading. All reading and writing activities at any level of learning should be preceded by oral activities which clarify and perhaps summarize the reading and writing to be done. Oral questions and oral summaries are excellent techniques for ensuring comprehension. It goes without saying that the oral preparationffor composition writing and for the reading of any material which has been written will also contribute to the growth of listening-speaking abilities.

In order to use language with any degree of proficiency learners need to be helped to build a repertoire of utterances as they meet them over and over again in listening, speaking, reading or writing activities, so that they will learn to expect them and even to anticipate them as they are listening to a stream of speech or reading. They will need extensive practice in the same wide range of utterances--acquired through tightly controlled to gradually decontrolled practice--so that they can retrieve the appropriate utterance from their memory store to communicate- to encode and decode language - in increasingly mature or complex situations. They need also to respond to and produce the utterances needed in all the curriculum areas in which they are participating or are expected to participate. The language of the curriculum areas must be included in all language teaching materials. It will not be learned incidentally or by osmosis.

The task is a formidable one in the elementary and secondary schools particularly because of the problems cited at the beginning of this talk. In the absence of "easy" administrative and classroom organizational solutions, teachers and administrators will have to do several things:

1. Find out everything they can about the Spanish language; about Puerto Rican cultural values and about the Puerto Rican educational system in order to develop a learning environment which will be most conducive to maximizing the potential of learners. I am sure that I am expressing the gratitude of all of us to the Department of Education of Puerto Rico for what this conference gives us or adds to our insights of these factors.

2. Become thoroughly familiar with theories and practices in grouping and in individualizing instruction in order to provide for heterogeneity of pupils in the same classrooms.

3. Prepare printed and audio-visual instructional materials which will enable all learners to participate in integrative school and classroom activities with other pupils -- that is non-language learners -- as quickly as feasible from the very first day.

4. Prepare differentiated materials at various levels of ability and for different age groups designed to provide intensive practice as needed in pronunciation, grammar or vocabulary.

5. Prepare concept-based English teaching materials in the curriculum areas which will enable learners to function as quickly as possible in the curriculum areas at their grade level to close the gap between their preparation and the level at which they find themselves in school. (Some of these materials will have to be prepared in Spanish.)

6. Simplify and/or adapt textbooks in all the curriculum areas for which the learner will be responsible.

7. Supply detailed guides for teachers which will enable them to use the material mentioned with most profit for the students.

8. Provide informal and formal measures of evaluation so that the pupils, their parents, community leaders and concerned school personnel will note progress or diagnose deficiencies impeding normal progress.

9. Enlist the cooperation of teacher aides, parents and community resource personnel in helping the learners.

Let me conclude by mentioning several principles in which I strongly believe. The learner must be helped to retain pride in his language and culture as he moves gradually toward an acceptance of the English language. Indeed, his experiences in his language and culture - two assets each learner brings with him - should be referred to continuously in every classroom not only as motivating devices but also as a bridge to an understanding of similar or contrasting features in English.

It is not necessary to say to this audience that each learner must feel loved, secure and successful as he passes through the often painful stages of English language acquisition. Giving the learner pride in his culture and a feeling of still belonging to the Spanish speaking world should underlie all his experiences in the school and the community. It would be sinful not to help the pupil maintain and develop his Spanish language skills, his insight into this rich culture, and his pride in his Hispanic background.

I would like to submit, however, that on top of these basic ingredients, it is imperative to give to each learner, particularly the younger ones, (The program for older, functional illiterates needs radical modification), knowledge, skills and understanding in the English language and - through English, as soon as feasible - an understanding of all other curriculum areas. Since he lives in an English speaking world it is primarily through the medium ofEEnglish that he will experience needed success in the school now and in the world of work later.

I cannot emphasize enough the importance of an intensive English learning program to the learner in terms of his identity, his morale and his ego-enhancement. Every learner has an overweaning need to feel that he is on a par with his fellow students. Our aim, our hope, our effort

should be directed toward making each learner - lucky he - feel comfortable and successful in <u>two</u> languages and in <u>two</u> cultures.

To make this hope become a reality, love is not enough. Let us make sure that we give each learner the acceptance, the warmth and the pride which he needs to become a well-integrated individual. But let us not neglect to give him, at the same time, the tool which he needs to communicate, to enter the mainstream of life in school and in the community, and to make a lasting contribution to the predominantly English speaking world in which he or his family has settled.

Our learners today will be the leaders of tomorrow. Let us give our Puerto Rican children on the mainland the attitudes and the knowledge they will need to exercise leadership. No nation can afford to lose the gift that every human being can bring to it. The loss of even one will diminish all of us.